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Senate Asserts Itself

Fulbright Hearings End a Decade As Automatic Rubber Stamp

By Drew Pearson

LAST WEEK'S Senate Foreign Relations Committee inquisition of Secretary of State Dean Rusk was a case of the Senate's reasserting itself after long years of neglect in scrutinizing American foreign policy.

For one whole decade the Senate had rushed out to embrace and bless any action by the White House that was wrapped in the guise of combating communism. And Lyndon Johnson, when Majority Leader of the Senate, was one of those who led the embracing.

Naturally, he expected the same quick and superficial blessing from a Democratic Senate that he, as a Senator, gave President Eisenhower and the Republicans. Up until this week he got it.

In 1955, after John Foster Dulles had "unleashed" Chiang Kai-shek only to find that President Truman was right and that Chiang had to be protected rather than unleashed, it was Sen. Lyndon Johnson who put the Formosan Straits Resolution through the Senate. This gave Senate blessing, in advance, to any showdown or war instigated by the Eisenhower Administration.

Again, in 1958, when President Eisenhower landed Marines in Lebanon, Sen. Johnson piloted a blanket resolution of approval through the Democratic-controlled Senate.

With this bipartisan history of forgiving foreign policy blunders, Lyndon Johnson, once he became President, felt that the precedent should continue—especially since he, as a Senator, had been so generous to the Executive in the past.

THEREFORE, shortly after Barry Goldwater was nominated in 1964 on a platform charging Democratic weakness toward the Communist threat in Southeast Asia, President Johnson wanted to prove that he was not soft on communism. To this end, he had White House defense adviser McGeorge Bundy prepare a resolution for swift Senate approval when the next incident in Vietnam occurred. It was similar to those which he had passed for President Eisenhower, and Bundy had it ready well before the Gulf of Tonkin incident.

To show further that his new Administration was not soft on communism, the Pres-

ident had the weak military ruler of South Vietnam, Gen. Khanh, begin a series of raids along the North Vietnamese coast, from small landing craft under the watchful eye of the U.S. destroyer Maddox.

The North Vietnamese complained to the International Control Commission about the presence of the Maddox as protector of these raids, which took place July 25 and 31. There was no response from the United States.

Finally, on Aug. 2, Vietnamese PT boats approached the Maddox, which opened fire, sinking one PT boat and damaging two. It was a one-sided battle and the Defense Department kissed it off as a "minor incident."

Next day, however, the White House saw the minor incident as a major excuse for passing the Senate resolution that McGeorge Bundy had drafted. The President protested officially, and warned North Vietnam there would be retaliation if it attacked again.

Two days later, Aug. 4, after another South Vietnam raid of the North Vietnam coast, there was a vague, possible encounter in the Gulf of Tonkin, which the commander of the Maddox described in a cable to Washington as follows:

"A review of action makes many reported contacts and torpedoes fired appear doubtful. Freak weather effects and over-eager sonar men [underwater listening experts] may have accounted for reports. No visual sightings by Maddox. Suggest further evaluation before any further action."

THE COMMANDER of the Maddox, Cmdr. Herbert Ogier, had a much cooler head than those who directed policy in Washington or the Senators who so quickly ratified policy.

President Johnson next day ordered 64 air strikes against the North Vietnamese, and the same day, Aug. 5, asked the Senate to pass the Bundy resolution blessing any showdown in this area. Obviously he did not wait for the evaluation of the facts that Cmdr. Ogier had recommended.

The information which Cmdr. Ogier cabled to the Pentagon was available to those who really wanted the truth, because Jack Anderson informed readers of this

column on Aug. 18, 1964, that U.S. authorities had known of the South Vietnamese raids—in which the North Vietnamese believed the Maddox was involved—and that the attacks or alleged attacks therefore were not unprovoked.

This information, however, was withheld from the Senate. So the Senators, following their previous slapdash custom of blessing the foreign policy mistakes of John Foster Dulles and President Eisenhower, hurriedly passed the resolution which they now regret. Only two Senators, Wayne Morse of Oregon and Ernest Gruening of Alaska, both Democrats, had the courage to vote against their President.

THE TRAGEDY is that during this same crucial summer the North Vietnamese had appeared ready to talk peace.

U Thant, secretary general of the United Nations, had so informed President Johnson, and had proposed the reconvening of the 1954 Geneva Treaty powers which wrote the peace treaty for the French. Russia, a nation with great influence over the North Vietnamese, joined U Thant.

The National Liberation Front stated publicly that it favored negotiations, and the North Vietnamese government sent feelers to the United States through Burma, indicating it was ready to talk.

President Johnson invited Prime Minister Lester Pearson of Canada to the LBJ Ranch in August, 1964, ostensibly to discuss auto tariffs, but actually to ask him whether the North Vietnamese were serious about discussing peace. Pearson reported back that they were. President de Gaulle also threw his influence into the situation on the side of peace talks.

But President Johnson, as previously described by this column, was too worried about Barry Goldwater's charge that he was soft on communism. He did not act on the peace feelers until well after the election, by which time it was too late. The North Vietnamese had seen so many governments come and go in Saigon that they figured they could win without sitting down at the conference table.

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